

# **Claims Processing Focus Group Report**

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### **Introduction**

This report is a synthesis of the many issues identified and specific suggestions offered during a series of focus groups held with veterans and Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) front-line staff around the country. These focus groups gathered information on what aspects of service, particularly timeliness and communication, were important to veterans in the area of compensation, pension, and education benefits. The primary purpose of the focus groups was to provide information which will be used to develop the questionnaire for the VBA Generic Local Customer Survey. This survey is intended to provide accurate, timely, customer feedback on an ongoing basis for all VBA Regional Offices, VBA Areas, and VBA nationwide.

By necessity, this report contains only highlights of veteran and employee issues and suggestions for improving the current claims processing system. However, as the focus groups provided insight into a wide variety of issues, selective use of the original data by particular VBA teams or organizations could also help them delve more deeply into specific areas of interest.

### **Methodology**

A total of sixteen focus groups were held from March 15 through April 6, 1995; eight were held with veterans, and eight were held with VBA front-line employees. One employee and one veteran focus group was held in each of the following locations, either at VBA's Regional Office or at a nearby facility: Baltimore, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Sioux Falls, Winston-Salem, Muskogee, Seattle, and Phoenix. The focus group project was undertaken by VBA's Office of Resource Management, Customer Surveys Team. A private contractor, Arlene Gale Selis of Strategic Systems, conducted the focus groups and prepared selected transcription from the comments. VA staff helped develop the moderator's guide, identified and selected potential participants, observed and audiotaped the focus groups, and wrote the final report.

Previous focus groups, and the results of VBA's Customer Based Measures Survey, identified several aspects of service delivery which needed improvement.

These included: explaining the full range of benefits and services to veterans, keeping veterans informed of the status of claims or requests, clearly explaining reasons for decisions, reducing the length of time it takes to process a claim, and improving access to service (by phone, mail, or in person). This set of focus groups was designed to "dig deeper" into these specific areas in order to obtain more detail about the nature of the problem, and to obtain specific suggestions for improvement. As such, the focus groups centered on what was working, what wasn't working, and suggestions for improvement in these areas.

Both veteran and employee focus groups covered the same topics. However, employees were also asked about the tools and technology they had to do their job, and what improvements they could suggest.

The veteran focus groups (7 to 12 persons per group) consisted of individuals who recently had applied for compensation, pension, or education benefits. Potential participants were randomly selected, with a mixture of those with pending, granted, or denied claims. The employee focus groups consisted of employees who dealt directly with veterans such as veterans benefits counselors, or who dealt directly with veterans' claims such as adjudicators or claims examiners. Aside from the participants, only the contractor and VA focus group project staff were present while the groups were being conducted.

## **General Findings**

Both veterans and employees are frustrated by not being able to obtain or relate sufficient information to expedite the claims process. This frustration is exacerbated by the dependence on certified paper documents in order to make a decision. The dependence on paper, in turn, makes it difficult to obtain documents, match them with the folder, inform the veteran of the status of the claim, and clearly relate the decision to the claimant. The reliance on paper certification meets the legal and regulatory requirements of the laws VA administers, but poses a severe obstacle in providing quality service to veterans. As one employee said, "Remember, a rating specialist sits between a doctor and an lawyer. That is, we have to take stuff written by doctors and apply it to rules written by lawyers."

Veterans are either angry or resigned to the "red tape" they have to go through to get a claim processed. In the military they were told, either implicitly or explicitly, that the VA should and would take care of them. They feel somewhat betrayed by the fact that they served their country, and now the burden of proof is on them to prove their case. One veteran stated "Veterans are pushed aside; they deserve better service for what they did." Another said, "They treat us like we want something for nothing."

An unintended outcome of the reliance on paper documents and the need for extensive records, is that it is easier for younger veterans to have claims processed,

and possibly granted. This is because these younger veterans (or the record centers) are more likely to have a copy of their medical records, other supporting data is "fresher", and they receive more information on veterans benefits when leaving the military.

Most veterans thought it took too long to process their claim, although their expectations were lowered somewhat because they were dealing with "government", and "government " takes a long time. The fact that the claim could be paid retroactively helped offset the delay somewhat, but younger veterans or pensioners often cited the need for a means to live on while the claim was being processed. Some older veterans think VA is just stalling, waiting for them to die so the claim won't have to be paid.

Although VBA employees gave more specific suggestions for improvement, veterans themselves emphasized over and over again that VA needed to upgrade its computer systems. A widow of a Navy veteran stated, "We're supposed to be in the Modern Age. The computers can do it faster. Common sense tells you they could do it probably more efficiently, at a lesser cost, if they put to use the technology they have." Most veterans assumed that VA and the Department of Defense (DoD) could actively share files. One veteran said, "It's a long drawn-out process of you submitting a claim and waiting on the VA to track down your records when the government, which the VA is part of, should have access to this or another source (for this information)." VA employees mirrored this frustration, particularly when attempting to obtain information from DoD.

In general, veterans were supportive of the efforts of VA employees, realizing that the workload was enormous. However, reflecting their perception of deteriorating service, one employee said, "The customer believes we don't care." One veteran said, "I think with what they have to work with, they're doing tremendously." Many veterans, however, offered the observation that the workload was exacerbated by the lack of access to computerized files and the amount of rework, particularly in the reopened claims and appeals area.

Many veterans don't understand the claims process and don't know what to expect. In some cases they don't understand that VA is carrying out specific laws, rather than arbitrarily imposing rules and regulations. While most veterans feel that individual employees have been courteous and respectful to them, they are still asked to do things (such as prove that their children are really theirs) that makes them feel untrustworthy. One veteran said, "Treat us with respect, and be up front with us. When you file a claim, you feel like a criminal. You're treated that way--they don't believe you." An employee remarked, "Veterans think the VA is out there to say No!"

Veterans often used a Veteran Service Organization representative to help with their claims, but some veterans felt that they shouldn't have to do this in order to

expedite the process. As one veteran said, "This is a service that the VA is supposed to provide. We should not have to go through the DAV (Disabled American Veterans) to get somebody to go ahead and do the job to begin with." There was a general feeling that the system was unfair, with the rewards going to those who knew how to "work the system" while others just give up because they don't want to go through the process.

Employees felt that an effort was made to inform veterans about benefits, but that their customers "understand only what they want to read, understand, and remember." They also observed that veterans seem to feel that any medical problem is covered by VA, and that they do not understand what a service-connected disability means. Some employees felt burdened by the number of "frivolous claims" and the number of issues that had to be addressed. Employees would like more discretion in their jobs, making common sense decisions, rather than always following rigid procedures. Some mentioned that being under production standards made it difficult to provide quality service--there just wasn't time.

Both veterans and employees expressed an interest in forming a partnership to facilitate the claims process, rather than depending just on the VA or the veteran to provide the necessary information. Both agreed that in order to do this, however, veterans must have better information about the claims process.

### **Veterans Want Information on VA's Full Range of Benefits and Services**

Veterans often don't know which benefits they are eligible for and do not know what is required to apply for them, an observation that was mirrored by employees. There is a perception by veterans that "a lot of these programs and things that are set up through the VA are kept hush-hush." An employee mentioned that "VA is like an underground movement." Veterans report that much information about benefits is spread word of mouth, so that getting correct information seems to be a hit-or-miss proposition.

Veterans thought the VA should tell them what benefits are available to them. They generally thought TAP and DTAP (Transition Assistance Programs) were useful, but didn't do much to help the older veteran who had never been through the program, or one who went through the program years ago. Both veterans and employees thought that pamphlets and the "fact sheets" sent out by Regional Offices were an excellent resource if you knew how to get them. Some veterans did not like having to join a service organization just to find out about changes in veterans' benefits. Some suggested that once a veteran leaves the military, or first comes into VA's system, they periodically receive computer-generated questionnaires and/or updates on benefits and how to apply. In order to reach all veterans, media campaigns should be undertaken to spread basic benefits information and to improve VA's image.

They also suggested that VA send representatives out to explain benefits to areas not served easily by a VBA Regional Office, or set up outreach centers in local communities. In terms of education benefits, veterans like having a veteran representative at local colleges and universities, and would particularly like them there prior to registration. These representatives, however, should be fully trained.

### **Make it Easier for Veterans to Apply For a Claim**

Even before filing a claim, employees mentioned that veterans often have unrealistic expectations or misconceptions concerning benefits, from information they have received from non-VA sources, such as Veterans Service Organizations, the military, or state or county veterans' representatives. This makes it difficult to set the record straight--some common beliefs are that the VA will have all the information needed to process their claim, they will receive the benefits they applied for, and that they will always get the amount of money they think they are entitled too. Some career military personnel believe that their military status will result in preferential treatment in processing their claims. One employee suggestion to alleviate the problem of misinformation is to develop a thorough training program for individuals in Veteran Service Organizations and for other non-VA personnel dealing with veterans, to ensure that accurate, consistent, and comprehensive information is provided.

Employees acknowledge that there are many benefits, and there are complex regulations which govern them. Many incomplete applications are submitted. Veterans want a one-stop processing center where everything gets done right up front. They want forms which are easy to complete. Current forms are detailed, printed in small type, often without adequate space to respond. Employees report that some veterans want personal assistance to complete "scary" forms, particularly persons applying for pension benefits. Employees also recommended that all application forms be reviewed, to be sure VBA is asking only for information which is absolutely needed. Some forms need to be in larger print. On a practical level, employees would like to have all forms available to be printed directly from their computer, rather than using pre-printed forms.

Once a claim is filed, veterans receive letters that say, "Don't call us, we'll call you." These letters are sent to veterans telling them their claim was received, the process will take some time, and instruct them not to call VA, but gives them a 1-800 number to call. This letter gives mixed messages. Veterans get anxious because they do not want to jeopardize the claims process, but they do want information. As one veteran said, "Why do they give me the 1-800 number if they don't want me to use it?"

Employees think that veterans have no idea of what it takes to process a claim.

As such, they recommend taking the time up front to work with veterans to ensure that when claims are submitted, they include all the information needed to begin processing the claim. Another suggestion is that, in addition to providing assistance in filling out forms (if needed), employees conduct a telephone or personal interview to collect all the information at that time. At present, much follow-up takes place by written correspondence which adds to the time to process a claim. They also suggested that whenever veterans are asked to show up in person, make sure they are told what documents to bring with them.

### **Make it Easier to Document a Claim**

For most veterans, one of the most frustrating aspects of the claims process is trying to locate files. They assume that VA has their military or other records, or that they can be easily obtained through interagency data-sharing. One veteran said, "They can't find my medical records anywhere..If you come in with a DD-214 and they put you in their computer system, why can't they press a button and pull you up? I mean the police can do it." They also resent having to prove they are veterans at each VA facility. Veterans suggested that they be given official VA photo ID cards which they could use to prove their veteran status throughout the VA system.

Another was put off by the amount of legwork he had to do to duplicate information the military already had. "I didn't understand how someone that spent 20 years of their life in the military, (and I know that they have my records because my DD-214 was sent to them), that you have to get birth certificates for all of your kids. I have four kids--they were born in different states. I had to send a letter to each state, and some states charged me a fee..and I had to go to three different states to prove over again to them that they were my legitimate children. And I couldn't understand that."

Employees also admit that it is sometimes difficult to obtain records. One employee indicated, "When things go to St. Louis, they fall into a big black hole. It's tough to indicate if and how they will appear again." This dependence on "official records" limits, in some cases, the employee's ability to respond appropriately. "It's terrible when you have a person on the line with a body on the roadside waiting for permission to be buried, and we say we don't have the right information. That's crazy! It's like a secret vein of the government."

Veterans suggested having VA obtain veterans' medical records automatically at the time of separation from the military. Both employees and veterans suggested that all veterans should be urged to get copies of their medical records when they left the military, to expedite the claims process. Also, veterans suggested that as soon as military personnel decide to retire, they should be encouraged to complete forms while in the service for benefits they are eligible to receive after discharge. They would also like DoD and VA to create a follow-up system to maintain the

location of physicians who made service medical decisions or performed exams for VA, in case the veteran needed to contact them for more information at a later date.

Employees also recommended developing a better interface system with other agencies such as the Social Security Administration and the Internal Revenue Service. They strongly recommended that VBA strengthen the coordination between DoD and VA to obtain veterans' medical records, thereby developing a method to shorten the time to obtain these records. VA should consider an interface system with DoD to electronically access Service Medical Records (SMR's) from DoD or wherever they are located, and to be able to readily access gross military retirement pay from DoD.

Even when documents are located and sent to VA, veterans cannot understand how records get lost. They also don't understand why VA at times asks them to produce the same document three times. One veteran stated, "VA has a tendency to lose paperwork--I don't understand. I did for my country, now look what my country can do for me?" Employees suggested that when written correspondence is necessary, include a stamped, addressed envelope to ensure the information is routed quickly to the right office. Or after a claim has been submitted, send an acknowledgment letter with a roll of bar-coded stickers for veterans to use to help match up the correspondence with the claim, telling veterans that the use of these stickers will expedite the claims process.

### **Veterans Want to be Informed of the Status of Their Claim**

Veterans cannot understand why VA cannot give them information updates on where their claims are, what has been done, what needs to be done, and when they can expect them to be completed. One veteran said, "No one tells me. I don't know who to see or the details of what to do." Another veteran said, "They're not giving you what you want. They're giving you what they want to give you." Veterans recommended that VA acknowledge receipt of claims, tell veterans what is needed, and how long the claims process should take.

Both veterans and employees agree VA should inform veterans of the primary steps in the claims process. As each stage is completed, VA should give veterans updates, let them know the next step, what the veteran needs to do, and how long it will take to make a final determination. In this way, VA can give veterans clearer instructions on what they can do to help in the claims process. At the current time, many veterans do not realize they can help by obtaining the documents needed to process a claim. Employees also feel that veterans expect them to do everything, and that veterans abdicate self-responsibility, without realizing that the more they do for themselves, the faster VA can work their claim.

Veterans want to be able to call the VA and get an immediate response without getting the run-around. They feel that anyone who works for VA should have access

to their complete files. Veterans who call VA with questions expect to get an answer at that time. They also expect to get consistent information regardless of who they talk to. Some veterans like the current 1-800 number. However, one veteran stated, "The 1-800 number is definitely a benefit, but it still doesn't alleviate the fact that they just say "well, it's in processing or its here or there...or sitting on this desk right here and it hasn't moved in six months."

Other solutions offered by veterans were to have a better computer tracking system to keep veterans better informed of the status of their claim. This response came from being told by VA that if their file was pulled to answer their status request, it would then go to the bottom of the stack. Employees acknowledge that because advanced technology has resulted in an information explosion, veterans assume information requests are routine and reasonable.

Employees state that the information on the pending screen on the computer provides limited information. Therefore, the employees find it difficult to give comprehensive, helpful information. When asked for current information, an employee stated, "We can't give it because we can't get it."

A recommendation by employees is that VA provide space on the computer screen to allow employees to enter narrative about what is needed to process the claim and the current stage of the claims process. This data would allow anyone using the computer to provide the same information to veterans calling in for status reports. This information would be entered either by adjudicators or benefits counselors so that an electronic diary or log of information for each claim would be maintained.

### **Veterans Want Prompt Decisions on Their Claims**

The recommendation made most often by veterans when asked for a suggestion for improving service was, "Speed up the claims process." Employees also know that veterans want their claims to be granted on a timely basis. One employee indicated, "Vet's don't know enough about what we do and the requirements on us to know how to feel about what we're doing. " Another employee said, "We also need to understand them." In general, veterans cannot understand why it takes so long to process their claims.

The reality is, according to employees, that claims processing does take a long time for many applicants. They know that current operating practices result in several bottlenecks in claims processing. Waiting to receive required information results in a significant processing delay. Employees know that veterans appreciate honesty. They stated that veterans would be more understanding if you let them know there is a large backlog of claims. Veterans want VA to give them a realistic estimate of how long it should take to process their claims. Some veterans have no idea how long the process will take. Other veterans expect to wait a long time. What constitutes a long time differs from veteran to veteran. Younger veterans tend



to expect faster decisions than older veterans. According to employees, when veterans call VA and want to know how long it will take to finish processing their claims, employees have trouble giving an accurate response. Veterans cannot understand why VA cannot tell them how long it will take.

When a claim has been pending a long time, employees suggest sending computer-generated claims' status letters to veterans. Veterans want to be reassured that their claims are not lost.

Both veterans and employees think that certain types of claims should be identified and expedited (i.e. when individuals are hospitalized, have life-threatening conditions, or are permanently disabled.)

Veterans also recommend that VA reduce the time to process education benefits. Veterans are strapped because they do not have the money needed to pay up front out-of-pocket costs for their education. As such, they need timely financial assistance from VA. They suggest that VA review and minimize extensive regulations.

Employees also thought that veterans wanted VA to shape their expectations of the claims process and the length of time it takes to process a claim, particularly providing periodic updates if the processing takes a long time.

Both veterans and employees would like to see VA hire more staff to deal directly with the veteran and to handle the large number of claims and the heavy backlog. They also thought that more rating specialists were needed. Both groups, however, did not see this as an immediate solution, given the current budget deficit and emphasis on downsizing. Employees suggested encouraging the use of volunteers to undertake such tasks as the photocopying of veterans records.

### **Veterans Want Fairness in Adjudication and an Understanding of Claims Decisions**

Veterans think that VA tends to disbelieve veterans' medical conditions and that they are service-connected. One veteran said, "VA makes you feel like you are lying and trying to rip off the system." Another veteran stated "If you have an arm or leg cut off, you get help quick because it is obvious to the eye."

Veterans cannot understand why they are denied for benefits for information never received or for failing to show up for medical examinations when they never received notification of those appointments. Exams are often scheduled at inconvenient times (one veteran had one scheduled for 8:30 AM and 5:30 PM on

the same day), and can be difficult to get to without a car. Even when an exam is held, veterans find it difficult to comprehend how a doctor can make a decision about their medical condition without (apparently) conducting a thorough examination. In some cases, veterans feel they have been penalized by doctors who have failed to document thoroughly their medical condition, particularly for conditions that come and go.

They also feel that an excessive burden of proof is put on them to come up with medical records. Veterans wish that VA would give them the benefit of the doubt when records are not available. "VA seems to be more concerned with paperwork than with medical conditions," stated one veteran. One veteran related that his medical records were destroyed in the St. Louis fire, the doctor who treated him had died, but he was able to locate several individuals who served with him to attest under oath to his medical condition (that he was treated for psychiatric problems). However, VA claimed that was inadequate. Another veteran was able to document that he bailed out of a mid-air collision during World War II, but because of the perfunctory discharge exam common at the end of the war, he could not get his claim granted. His description of the exam was, "If you were being discharged within a month after the end of the war, they said bend over, and you opened your mouth, and if they didn't see daylight, you could go home. You were in good shape."

Employees are aware that veterans think that just because a benefit was not sought it might not be rated. When adjudicators become aware of possible benefits for a veteran, they respond accordingly. If veterans knew VA did this, they might not apply for everything and anything even remotely possible.

Veterans expect that a large percentage of their claims will be denied the first time. One veteran said, "Government purposely gives you a hard time hoping you will give up." Veterans believe that the number one factor in getting any benefit is persistence. Employees believe that a denial is an appeal.

There were mixed reviews of the decision letters. Some veterans thought they were very thorough, and stated all reasons for the decision clearly. For persons whose claim was denied, many found the denial letter more explanatory than any other information they had received from VA previously. They also found the instructions on how to reapply clear and appropriate. Others found the denial letters confusing, and hard to interpret without an understanding of the overall rating process. Regardless of the nature of the decision letter, many veterans claim that decisions on claims lack specific information about the basis for these decisions. This was especially true of the relationship of the medical condition (or lack thereof) to the rating schedule, and the degree of disability.

Employees feel that it is important to veterans to understand the reason they are granted or denied benefits. As such, they think that it is important to use routinely, clear, concise language to explain the reasons for decisions. The most recent

letters designed appear to be an improvement. However, both veterans and employees feel that some telephone or face-to-face explanation of the decision helps the veteran's understanding of the decision.

Veterans had a difficult time understanding how they could be discharged from the military with a medical condition, and then have that condition ignored by VA in deciding their claim. They also could not understand why VA and the military rated them with different degrees of disability for the same condition.

There was also concern among veterans about the quality of review, given the excessive workload. Some veterans thought they may have been "top-sheeted" where the new evidence was not thoroughly evaluated. Others thought that if a claim is denied and subsequently resubmitted, that claim should receive priority consideration when accompanied by new information, rather than going to the bottom of the pile. Both employees and veterans see adjudicators working within a very strict system where there is limited leeway in decision making. At the same time, both groups say they know of cases where the same basic medical conditions have resulted in widely different ratings.

Veterans wondered why VA can't get it done right the first time, and shorten the whole denial/appeals process. Front-line employees also recommended that the appeals process be shortened. They recommended giving local boards more latitude in decision making. They also recommended eliminating the Board of Veterans Appeals and letting the Court of Veterans Appeals make the final determination.

### **Veterans Want More Quality Interaction With VA Staff**

Veterans want to be given respect and fair treatment. "Treat me fair, and treat me right," claimed one veteran. Veterans want to be treated as people not just as another piece of paper. One veteran said, "We're customers. Treat us like customers." Another suggested, "Put the personal into personnel."

While most veterans thought VA employees were very helpful once you reach them by telephone, and that counselors were both helpful and informative, other veterans thought that VA staff should show greater sensitivity and give more respect to veterans. One veteran suggested that VA should hire more veterans, because "A vet understands a vet better than a non vet."

Veterans want to be contacted more by phone and less by mail. Employees acknowledge that some form letters are incomplete. Some computer-generated letters are difficult to understand. One employee said, "Letters are written to protect VA, not to inform the public." Letters are also too impersonal. "If letters were personalized, we would probably get fewer appeals," indicated one employee. One older veteran receiving a pension did not like the tone of a debt-collection letter,

which implied he was not intending to pay the money back, when the overpayment was not his fault in the first place. Veterans would like a telephone number on all written correspondence, so that they can call and ask questions about the letters they receive.

Veterans find it difficult to understand some written correspondence. They do not always understand VA wants from them. They also suggest that letters be simplified, and that correspondence be directed at the level of the audience. One veteran claimed, "Not all veterans are administrators." Another veteran said, "The average person can't figure it out. It's almost done to intimidate you!"

For these reasons, and others, some veterans want VA to assign one person to their case. They want VA to tell the veteran the name of that person and the person's supervisor. In general, they want to reduce the number of people who need to get involved in processing their claim. One veteran emphasized, "The DAV is a much smaller organization than the Veterans (VA). However, every time I go down there and sign in, the guy I dealt with from day one is the same guy I deal with every time...At least I don't have to go explaining my situation each and every time."

They also wanted to establish a liaison to contact in time of need. One veterans requested, "We need someone to be a liaison between the veterans and VA to help with the case instead of dealing with a monster. No one in VA seems to know what we are talking about." They also suggested having someone who can help veterans with individual claims. One veteran said, "Tell us who to talk to if you can't help us."

Others suggested the creation of a "Catch-22 Department", which would provide correct information when the veteran receives conflicting information. This is particularly important once checks are being sent out which are incorrect. Veterans recommend that a specific correction process be communicated for their use when checks of the incorrect amount are sent to them. Also, if the amount of a check is changed, VA should send a letter with the check to explain the reason for the change.

### **Employees View of How to Improve Service to Veterans**

Employees have observed that veterans want to have one individual to contact to help them through the process. Ideally, veterans want to communicate with the person handling their claim. They want access too and time with that person. On the phone and in person, veterans want employees to take as much time as veterans feel they need to discuss veterans' individual cases.

VA staff reflected veterans feelings about wanting to do more business by phone than by mail. Employees also believe that written correspondence with veterans is overall too complex and difficult for the typical veteran to understand. Employees

feel some letters are intimidating to veterans. They have also noted that some veterans do not read; others do not read well.

Employees also believe that veterans want their claim to be done in one package. They do not want things to be handled in a piecemeal fashion. If possible, employees think that veterans would like them to develop the entire claim at one time.

Employees offered several solutions to these problems. They suggested that VA staff use the telephone more to obtain basic information missing from the claim form or to request additional documents to complete the claims file. In particular they thought that the telephone capability for persons in the Adjudication Divisions should be expanded. They also suggested that VA employees should review and revise correspondence with veterans, and modify these to ensure the letters are written clearly and concisely and targeted at the level of understanding of the audience. After all, letters that are difficult to comprehend result in more follow-up telephone calls which take time. They believe the letters are getting better, but all of them need to be written in more of a conversational tone.

Employees also mentioned some structural/management/regulatory barriers to providing what veterans want. For example, when veterans benefits counselors receive telephone calls, they direct their responses only to the questions asked by the veterans. They are penalized for giving full service. Because of time constraints, the emphasis on productivity versus quality, and the volume of calls waiting to be answered, they are unable to share more comprehensive information about additional benefits that might be available to particular veterans. One employee stated, "I feel handicapped to help the veterans." The emphasis on productivity resulted in one employee stating, "Statistics are more important to management than getting a quality product for veterans." Another said, "We're working on production rather than quality." Several employees stressed the need to shift from a productivity-driven organization to a greater emphasis on quality. Some employees feel that management is not fully aware of what it takes to get the job done, and that more supervisory training was needed to improve management practices and build more positive employee morale.

Employees were also concerned about regulations regarding who they could talk to about a claim. Employees state that they are supposed to deal strictly with the veteran and that this can be a problem. "VA only talks to the veteran even if that person is in a coma; VA claims it can't help a family member," remarked one employee.

VA employees recommended that VA review current business practices and find ways to streamline operations by eliminating some unnecessary steps. They also recommended investigating the claims processes used by various insurance companies and learn from their experience (benchmarking). If possible, find ways

to simplify the laws and the benefits, and reduce reporting requirements for veterans, particularly for the pension program. They also recommended reviewing the benefits to see if VA is the best place for it to be administered. Should, for example, the pension program be administered by the Social Security Administration rather than VA?

Many employees mentioned the need to strengthen the communication between individuals in the Veterans Services Division and individuals in the Adjudication Division. They also recommended that a team approach, including cross-training between the divisions, which would provide better service to veterans. Others thought the concept of case-management should be expanded, and that self-directed work teams should be started everywhere. They felt that VA should use the case management approach for greater control, to streamline the process, provide fewer hand-offs, strengthen morale, and build a more personalized approach to better serve the veteran. At minimum, a veterans benefits counselor (VBC) should be assigned to each adjudication team. That would help the VBC give veterans immediate, accurate responses to inquiries.

### **Tools and Technologies Needed to Improve Customer Service**

Along with organizational changes, employees also strongly suggested improvements in the tools and technologies they had available to do their job. The technology currently available in the various Regional Offices is not being fully utilized because employees do not know the extent of its capabilities, or the software is difficult to access or use. They recommend providing better design and comprehensive training to expand use of current technology, and conducting the training just prior to the time of implementation allowing employees time to practice new computer skills. Also, computer hardware and software should be upgraded to speed claims processing.

Employees dislike having to use different systems and having to take the time to log in and out of them continually. They would like the capacity to merge documents and use any information in the system. They would also like to produce their own letters, and to have a user-friendly set of rules and regulations available right on the computer. They see the advantage of doing more work directly on the computer, and recommended that all correspondence internal to a Regional Office should be put on the computer to eliminate shuffling of paperwork back and forth.

They also stressed that VA build a comprehensive, fast, state-of-the-art, nationwide computer network to access the claims file for any veteran in the system. They would like to put all files into the system which would eliminate tracking file folders that are currently moving from desk to desk or station to station. They also suggested using one word processing package so that everything is tied together in a complete system and using scanners to prevent losses. More importantly, they want the system to allow for input of narrative information to reflect current claims

status so that employees' responses to inquiries could be consistent and comprehensive. The stations should also provide for more lap top computers for employees in the field.

It would be an advantage to build in the capacity to easily make a simple record change that automatically reflected that change on all of the veteran's records, including the date of the change.

Employees also suggest that VA provide more FAX machines and photocopying machines so that employees don't waste time waiting in line or waiting for documents. They would also like to expand FAX usage to shorten processing time.

Employees also recommended using expanded telephone capacity to improve service. Operating hours could be expanded in offices where employees feel it is needed. This expansion could take place in a variety of forms which include the following possibilities:

- Stay open more hours Monday through Friday. Even the possibility of rollover phones among Regional Offices in different time zones might prove helpful.
- Consider telephone access on Saturdays and Sundays. It might be feasible to use call forwarding to the homes of VA employees on weekends to allow veterans greater and more convenient access.
- Have an answering service where veterans could leave their names and phone numbers for call backs outside of the regularly scheduled work hours, and instead of waiting to speak to a VA representative when there is a heavy volume of calls. Let veterans who are waiting on the line know how long it will be until their call is answered, so they can decide whether to wait or leave a message.
- Install a computerized 1-800 number specifically designed to give updated information on the status of claims.
- Install a basic telephone relay system. A taped message service could take names and addresses of veterans who need benefits pamphlets or application forms, or give basic benefit information. In addition, this approach could route calls to the right place.

Other suggestions by employees for improving telephone service within the Regional Office include: continue and expand the use of cordless headsets to monitor and aid the telephone calls waiting and have telephones readily available for all employees and make sure the telephone system can transfer calls to other departments in the Regional Office.

## **Final Observations**

Both veterans and employees seemed grateful and honored to have a chance to "tell VA" what they thought was working and what needed to be improved. There

were heartfelt thoughts and emotions on both sides; both groups brought good qualities to a complex system which was frustrating to both. Veterans showed incredible patience and endurance in the face of complex requirements and long waiting periods. Employees brought unusual dedication and innovation to their jobs. This dedication was summed up by one employee who said,

"One thing that we seem like we are here for right now is to understand our customer and how we can serve them better. Who is our customer? Our customer, if we will remember this, is the person who bought us our freedom. We should serve them that way, as best as we possibly can.

Even though you're under the gun all the time, trying to produce and do EP's (end products), EP's, and EP's; remember that EP is a person, not a number. They're the ones that ate out of the cold cans, they're the ones that got shot at, they're the ones that missed their families, they're the ones that stood out in the rain. If we can remember that, then we can serve them a little bit better."